

## Bishops' Battlelines on the Economy

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 15, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

In the 1920s, the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the forerunner of today's United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, threw its support behind efforts to enact child labor laws. But, there was no unanimity. Cardinal William Henry O'Connell, the archbishop of Boston, opposed the NCWC, arguing that the government had no right to interfere in parental rights and if the parents wanted their kids to work long hours in a sweatshop, so be it. O'Connell also resented the role of the NCWC more generally: After the death of Cardinal Gibbons in 1921, O'Connell was the senior churchman and thought he should be the spokesman for the Catholic Church in the U.S. not the NCWC.

I raise this historical anecdote because at this week's meeting of the USCCB, you could discern further evidence of polarization within the bishops' conference and the emergence of the next area of struggle: The bishops overwhelmingly decided to draft a statement on the economy and poverty.

In the question-and-answer session after Bishop Stephen Blaire presented the proposal for such a document, you could see the fault lines emerge. Bishop Earl Boyea of Lansing, Michigan stated that some people had perceived a "partisan action" against Congressman Paul Ryan in the letters to Congress from Blaire's committee, in which the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice pointed to the ways the Ryan budget failed the moral criteria set forth in the Church's social teaching. Boyea added that it was "perceived" as a wholesale dismissal of the Ryan plan and he voiced concern about our "deeply divided country" and that the bishops might be well advised to let the laity take the lead. The bishops are not expert in economic matters, and need to exercise humility. Bishop Blaire thoughtfully replied that the purpose of the document would be simply to raise up the principles of catholic social teaching and to impart some hope to "our people," many of whom are struggling in the sour economy. Bishop Blaire was kind in not pointing out that the bishops seem to have become rather expert in analysis of the First Amendment of late, and have not demonstrated much in the way of humility on that front, but he did not.

Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza, the archbishop emeritus of Galveston-Houston, recalled the bishops' 1986 pastoral letter on the economy, "Economic Justice for All," and hoped that the new text would build on the principles contained in that earlier document. Detroit Archbishop Allen Vigneron suggested that the drafters of the proposed text look closely at the connections between family life and poverty, although I worry whenever someone suggests that a strong family will produce more economic success, even though it is true. My worry is that almost everything in our culture is reduced to its economic utility these days and I do not think any good will come of the effort to so reduce familial love. Nonetheless, Archbishop Vigneron's point is well taken.

Then Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas took the microphone. I criticized the Kansas Catholic Conference last week for its utter failure to raise its voice against the anti-sharia law just passed by the state's legislature and signed by Gov. Sam Brownback. Naumann's partisan inklings were on display Wednesday also. He stated that there was a "perception problem with the conference and with this committee particularly as being perceived at times as partisan." He claimed that previous documents had under-emphasized the importance of subsidiarity in Catholic social teaching, which has become a favorite talking point, albeit two

months? out of date, among conservative Republican Catholics. If Naumann (and Cong. Ryan) look at the frequent and forceful defense of union rights in the social teaching of the Church, they will find ample evidence of the Church's commitment to subsidiarity because unions are precisely the kind of intermediate social actors subsidiarity calls for. (I suspect Naumann is one of those Catholics whose support for unions extended only to unions in Poland in the early 1980s.) Naumann claimed that too often, the bishops' statements in the past seemed to support state-run programs as the best way to fight poverty. He then made a factual claim: Naumann characterized such government programs as false solutions, saying "some solutions tried now for decades with no real results." Of course, I am all for improving government programs, but it is a fact that during this most recent recession, the worst since the 1930s, while many people were pushed into poverty, many of the evils that usually accompany poverty "increasing child mortality rates, increased malnutrition in both the very young and the very old, the emergence of new racial and ethnic tensions, the spread of communicable diseases, etc." these evils have been significantly ameliorated by government run programs.

The funny thing about this forthcoming to-and-fro will be that we will witness a sort of role reversal in the way we assess the ideological divisions within the hierarchy. Usually, it is those we label "conservative" who trumpet traditional Church teaching, claim that their opponents are deviating from Rome, and are suspicious of any accommodations with mainstream political culture. In this debate, however, it is those like Boyea and Naumann who are at odds with traditional Church teaching, who are far distant from recent (and older) papal teachings, and who are seeking to accommodate themselves to the current laissez-faire views of the Republican Party.

Another funny thing, and another role reversal, will be that many liberal Catholics have complained that the bishops' campaign for religious liberty has been driven by political, and Republican, bias and now many conservatives are worrying that a new statement on the economy will be driven by political, and Democratic, bias. Here is my rule of thumb: The Church needs to proclaim the teachings of our faith and let the partisan chips fall where they may. The Church also needs to proclaim those teachings in such a way that they point all politicians, on all issues, to seek deeper solutions. And, in the case of religious liberty, it is abundantly clear that the first step is for the Church's bishops to do a better job articulating precisely what the Church does teach about religious liberty and conscience. (Hint: That teaching is not just what John Courtney Murray said it was and, besides, Murray was more complicated, and recognized the inherent complications in the Decree on Religious Liberty, more honestly than his acolytes.) By comparison, the social magisterium is quite well developed. But, in both cases, I think the Church is right to say: if you are a Democrat and you wish to join the efforts of some to restrict the Church's ministries, we will oppose you and if you are a Republican and you wish to join the efforts of some to restrict programs that help the poor, we will oppose you too. We are called to minister and we are called to minister to the poor especially, and we Catholics are willing to fight anyone who gets in our way. There is a time to be stiff-necked.

There is an old fable, which like most fables, contained a kernel of truth within it, but which was usually found lacking when examined with rigor. That fable was this: Catholics know what they believe. There is a funny scene in *Brideshead Revisited* when the skeptical Charles Ryder questions the members of the Flyte family about the significance of having a priest at one's death bed. Needless to say, they make a hash of it. As Archbishop Lori said during the Q-and-A, the social teaching of the Church is one of its "best kept secrets." That needs to change and it should be hoped that the upcoming statement will help further the education of the Catholic faithful in its rich tradition.

I have gone on long enough, but wish to finish with two other points. Bishop Blaire stated several times that one of the reasons to draft such a document was to incorporate the teachings of Pope Benedict XVI, especially those found in his encyclicals *Deus Caritas Est* and *Caritas in Veritate*. One of the principal themes of the latter text is that the Church's teachings all hang together. I think this is vital. As John Carr wrote in his retirement letter:

*For years, I and others have said we sometimes feel "politically homeless," alienated from polarized politics and false choices that ask us to choose between defense of the unborn and protection of the poor, between Catholic moral principles and the Church's social teaching, between promotion of economic*

*justice and protection of religious liberty. When we are ?politically homeless,? it is not enough to proclaim our purity or complain about others; we need to find a home, or at least build a shelter. We need places and strategies to advance a consistent vision of defending human life and dignity, to bridge differences through civil dialogue and pursuit of the common good and to form and encourage more lay leaders to act as ?faithful citizens? in American public life.*

This proposed document should help ?build a shelter? for all of us who feel ?homeless? politically and, if we make that shelter inviting, I suspect we might be surprised how many people will find it attractive and wish to join us. The second key point to be drawn from Pope Benedict?s newer writings, about which I will write at greater length next week, is his emphasis on the importance of ?gift? in assessing economic, and indeed, all issues.

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